

Witnessing a Deadly Fall Drove Home the Point

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One late winter morning well after “Turn to” had been piped, I freed myself from paperwork and walked around my topside spaces to check on my division’s work progress. One of our tasks for the week was to repair a hole in a superstructure catwalk about 20 feet above the main deck, which overlooked an 02-level weather deck. Someone had decided the catwalk would drain more quickly after freshwater washdowns if it had a couple of extra drain holes in the deck. A crewmember had drilled them cleanly through the aluminum deck and in a neat, athwartships line.

Unfortunately, one of the holes was right over the door to the ship’s operations office 20 feet below, and draining water dropped onto people using that door. I assigned the “repair” job to the LPO and told him I expected it done by the day’s end. All we were going to do was plug the hole with a nut, bolt, and some washers.

I later went onto the weather deck, looked up, and saw one of my men hanging over the side of the catwalk. He had one arm hooked around a handrail stanchion and one ankle around another stanchion. He was holding a nut in place with his free hand as

another Sailor was trying to start the bolt while standing on the catwalk.

I called to the two Sailors to knock off what they were doing. Once they got to their feet, I explained that what they were doing was dangerous. I asked them to come down to the division office where we could talk privately. I educated them about safety harnesses, and the LPO then sent them back to work.

Later that afternoon, one of the Sailors with whom I had spoken about safety aloft was standing a quarterdeck watch. During that watch, he saw a Sailor on a nearby ammunition replenishment ship fall 33 feet to his death from that ship’s 03-level cargo winch deck to the flight deck below.

Around 1500, as I was leaving my ship for some early liberty, the young Sailor extended his hand, shook mine, and thanked me for making him wear a safety harness. Sadly, it took a tragedy of watching another Sailor die to punctuate a common-sense lecture about wearing a harness when working aloft. ☹

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